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ON INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN PUPILS

THE Society of Modern Philology in Saxony¹ has established an international correspondence between French, English, American, and German pupils, the effect of which may be said to be very helpful in the teaching of modern languages. It is a kind of new propelling power that has been introduced into the lessons, a new method of teaching, in which the pupils themselves are the professors, and it seems that they like better to learn from their equals than from their superiors.

A correspondence between single pupils has, it is true, existed for many years, especially between French and German boys. It was only about a year ago that it was established on a large scale in France by the "*Revue universitaire*," in Germany by the Saxon Society of Modern Philology. Upwards of one thousand pupils, male and female, have been put in correspondence with each other by a central committee, whose head is the well-known professor, Dr. Hartmann, at Leipzig.

As to the advantages which this correspondence offers, it must be observed that they are first of all practical ones. All teachers know how awkward boys are in writing letters, even in their native language; girls are by far more clever in this respect, and for them difficulties generally arise only when they are obliged to write in "foreign tongues." The common school subjects for the latter are often tedious to them, because they want a background which life only offers; an imaginary correspondent to whom the letter is addressed will never have the same charm for them as a real one. "A letter from abroad," says a renowned German teacher, "is an event, a concrete case, to which all the charm of personal and self-felt things is attached. It shows the pupils that beyond the frontier, 'beyond the moun-

¹ Der Sächsischer Neuphilologenverband, Professor Dr. Thiergen, Dresden, president.

tains' there are boys and girls living, who are toiling like them in order to learn the foreign language, who meet with the same difficulties in overcoming the obstacles which they find in their way. They perceive what an amount of labor and hard work is necessary before two nations, differing widely in customs and language, can make each other understood. With that perception a new world, as it were, is revealed to them, a new understanding of their work is given to them, it strikes them why they must toil so hard, and that it is not for the school or for the teacher that they are working. The towns beyond are no longer mere black points on the map, but filled with men, feeling and working and suffering like them; the language they learn, no longer a part of the schoolbooks only, which they open every day with more or less interest, but a means of conveying the ideas of a nation to others. The spirit of life pervades the dead world of books."

What a pleasure it is to a pupil when he has finished the first letter to a real Frenchman! To him it is like a great deed, an action he has done by himself, unhelped and unguided by teachers or parents, as is so often the case with school work. And a far greater pleasure when he receives the first answer! How carefully he peruses the list of mistakes he made, and how he takes care not to make the same blunders again! From this point of view the international correspondence is, indeed, a new means of promoting the often scanty results in the teaching of modern languages, an advantage which the classical languages cannot boast of, and which, in due time, ought to be employed in all schools where modern languages form the principal part of instruction.

In Germany more than 3000 addresses of foreign pupils have been asked for since the establishment of the central committee in Leipzig (from March 1897 to August 1898). Pupils of all kinds of schools are to be found among them, and the higher classes form a considerable part of them. In France and England, too, this new institution has met with the most favorable reception, only America has, as yet, proved a little skeptical as to the advantages of this kind of correspondence, which is easily

to be seen from the small number of addresses sent from this part of the world. And yet all those who have had an opportunity of observing the pupils who took part in this correspondence are unanimous in the praise which they give to it. The head master of the High School for Girls, in Aberdeen, F. I., writes in the *Journal of Education* (May 1898, p. 275): "I can testify from personal experience with my pupils that correspondence with German pupils is an excellent help and stimulus in the teaching of German. Our girls have taken up the matter most enthusiastically, and are eagerly looking forward to their monthly letters. Of course, the correspondence must be under the superintendence of the respective teachers, without, however, assuming the shape of help or correction. The correspondence gives a healthy interchange of views on school matters, customs of the countries, descriptions of towns and places, which cannot but be useful and helpful to the youthful correspondents. Particularly in the domain of idiom have I found the correspondence of great help. The young correspondents will also be very anxious to do their very best, for fear of causing ridicule by using wrong words or constructions, and will thereby be much improved in their ordinary school compositions. As one letter a month only from either side is demanded, it cannot be said to be a great tax on the pupil's time."

It is a matter of course that not all pupils can take part in this correspondence, but the profit derived from it may, nevertheless, be rendered universal, if the letters are sometimes read to the whole class and the contents made a subject for conversation in the lessons. In order to enable pupils of the lower or middle classes to share in the benefit which the international correspondence offers, and to give them an opportunity to find a correspondent with whom they may interchange letters for several years, it has proved very useful to cause those pupils to write alternately a letter in their own native language and a shorter one in the foreign idiom. We hope in this way to connect threads which will also last in after life. Only think what a pleasure it must be, when the two correspondents meet each other, after they have left school, when they can shake hands

after they have grown up and, perhaps, have become great men in their country. The spirit of peace which pervades the better classes of all European countries, and which is particularly fostered by the German emperor, is silently but effectively supported by this correspondence. For we must not forget that not only the pupils, or the schools and teachers, but also the parents and families to which the pupils belong take a lively interest in it. The arrival of a letter from abroad is a great event in the family, and the contents of the letter are read and discussed by all its members. The little joys and sorrows of the youthful correspondents, the festivals in the family or country, the customs, the events of the day, the different homes are growing quite familiar to the pupils and their families, and since so many thousands are corresponding with each other, we may say that the different countries which, up to this date, were used to consider each other as mortal enemies, only thirsting for each other's blood and only waiting for the opportunity of throwing the blazing torch of war into the peaceful homes of their adversaries, are linked together by new ideas, by peaceful thoughts, by mutual respect and love.

In order to prove that the families or parents are as well interested in the correspondence of their children as the pupils, I beg to cite a letter from a French gentleman, whose son had suddenly fallen ill, and who takes up the pen himself in order to answer the letter which his son had received from his German correspondent. It runs as follows :

Le 22 août 1897

MON CHER AMI :

Aux lieu et place de mon fils je vais vous accuser réception de votre aimable lettre du 18 ct. arrivée ici jeudi soir avec une splendide photographie dont nous vous remercions bien, toute la famille. Cette délicate attention témoigne en faveur des bons sentiments que vous portez à mon fils. Agréé-en, cher ami, toute notre gratitude.

X. par contre se fera un devoir en même temps qu'un plaisir de vous envoyer sa photographie en tenue de collégien français, sitôt son retour de N., où il se trouve en ce moment en villégiature estivale chez son oncle, qui n'a pas d'enfants et chez lequel il est par conséquent choyé et dorloté.

Nous avons effectivement appris par les journaux les effroyables inondations qui ont ravagé la Silésie et la Saxe tout récemment. Ces fléaux sont

bien terribles pour ceux qui en sont victimes. Heureusement que les bourses des favoris de la fortune viennent au secours des malheureux. L'empereur Guillaume a souscrit 15,000 mark pour les victimes des inondations. C'est un grand cœur !

Nous sommes heureux d'apprendre que votre usine n'a pas été trop malmenée. Recevez-en nos bien sincères félicitations !

Quant aux études de mon fils, elles sont loin d'être terminées. Il pourra vous donner à ce sujet plus de détails que moi. C'est plutôt son affaire, de même que pour leur tenue de collège qui a beaucoup d'analogie avec celle des officiers français.

Laissez-moi maintenant, mon cher ami, vous manifester toute mon admiration pour l'excellente initiative prise par les établissements d'instruction publique d'entretenir entre les élèves des différents pays d'Europe une correspondance aussi instructive qu'agréable. Nous sommes là bien loin des relations politiques où tout est méfiance et calcul. Cette idée est heureuse et ne pourra porter que de bons fruits. Elle sera peut-être un acheminement vers un rapprochement plus intime entre les deux grandes nations, qui sont loin d'être encore amies.

Vous voudrez bien, mon cher ami, présenter nos meilleurs compliments à vos chers parents, sans surtout oublier vos charmantes amies M^{lles} B. et C. qui ont eu l'amabilité de mettre un petit mot sur la lettre de mon fils.

En attendant vos nouvelles, nous vous assurons, mon cher ami, de nos meilleurs sentiments.

It is easily conceivable that in an institution so new as the International Correspondence, and so widely spread all over France, England, and Germany, in which so many different elements of pupils are mixed up, abuses may occur and, indeed, have occurred. To prevent these abuses a certain number of precepts have been given by the Central Committee, above all a certain restraint as to the subjects of the letters is to be observed, all matters of religion, politics, and those concerning the teachers being strictly excluded. In the following lines I beg to give the most prominent of these precepts.

1. The international correspondence is in all schools submitted to the superintendence of the teachers, who are trusted with the instruction in foreign languages. At all events the letters and other communications from abroad must be shown to the superintending teachers.

2. Only those pupils are to be admitted who may be absolutely trusted in a moral point of view and whose parents have

given their consent. At the very outset of their correspondence they must receive some information about the new kind of letter-writing they are going to begin, and above all they ought to be taught that they must never write anything that can dishonor them or their country.

3. The names of the pupils are to be sent in by the teachers, not by the pupils. An arrangement of the correspondence between the pupils themselves is not to be permitted; it could produce a great many abuses which might seriously endanger the whole institution.

4. Junior pupils, whose knowledge of French or English is sufficient for the understanding of a foreign letter, but not for writing one themselves, must in the beginning write in their native language; they will in this way be connected with their partners and mutually improve their knowledge of the foreign idiom.

5. Senior pupils write alternately in their native language and in the foreign idiom, or half of each letter in their native tongue, half in the foreign language. The first letter is always to be written in the mother language.

6. As these letters in the native tongue shall be typical ones, models of genuine German, French or English; particular care must be taken to render them interesting and free from any mistakes in form or orthography. Some hints from teachers or parents will be of great use in this respect.

7. It is advisable to gather the letters from abroad in a special book. They will prove an excellent means of improving in the foreign language by repeated perusals and at the same time be a very valuable memorial in after life.

8. Letters which are particularly remarkable in form or contents ought to be made the subject of conversation for the whole class, a copy of which in prominent cases would be very thankfully accepted by the Central Committee.

9. The mistakes made in a letter are to be corrected by the partner and sent back with his answer. The more these corrections are enlarged, especially by adding more refined constructions than those used in the letters, the more they will prove valuable to the partner.

10. The terms for sending letters are fixed by the correspondents themselves; it is, however, advisable not to write less often than once a month. The dates when letters are sent or received ought to be registered by the teacher.

11. To avoid irregularities in the sending of letters it will be of use to write the name and the address of the sender on the back of the letter. A pupil whose partner is prevented from continuing the correspondence must write to the Central Committee for a new partner, who is then generally procured from a different part of the country.

12. Postcards with views may occasionally be used, but cannot be thought sufficient for a regular correspondence. All printed missives must pass through the hands of the teacher before they are handed to the pupils. Any abuses of the correspondence are to be punished by striking the name of the pupil from the list of correspondents, or publishing it in some pedagogical paper.

However flourishing the institution of international correspondence may be, there is only a scanty list of names of American pupils to be found. And yet this country has a particular charm for all German boys and girls. A great many of them have relations living there; the mighty development of this vast republic cannot but excite admiration among all classes of people in the Old World; the intercourse, the commerce between America and Germany, increasing year by year, render the knowledge of American customs and institutions more valuable than that of any other country. It would, therefore, be considered as a very favorable effect of the above lines if the American schools would take a more active part in the correspondence with German pupils. Students and grown up persons are equally admitted to it, and will be connected with suitable partners. All names and addresses are to be sent to the Central Committee, Professor D. Hartmann at Leipzig-Gohlso, Wiesenstrasse 2.

OSCAR THIERGEN

DRESDEN,
Sept. 17, 1898